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ABSTRACT

The contemporary women's movement, communicating largely through the written word, mistakenly ignored or failed to notice the following: (1) almost one quarter of American women (23%) had severely limited literacy skills; (2) for female heads of households, 75% of those with less than a high school diploma lived in poverty; (3) nearly 40% of female single parents had an eighth-grade education; and (4) almost 35% of displaced homemakers had an eighth-grade education. Literacy was equated with personal power and opportunity, something denied to those with low literacy skills. The majority of feminist writings is largely theoretical and too scholarly for adult basic education students. Organizations such as Women Leading Through Reading pioneered a more politicized approach to feminist adult education by sponsoring groups for adult women working to improve their literacy skills. (About two thirds of the document is an annotated bibliography, directed at learning center coordinators and adult educators, that aims to provide a listing of feminist resources and reading materials for women with low literacy. It describes 24 books and curriculum materials published by feminist, university, and independent presses. Seven other resources, including non-profit foundations and focus groups in the United States and Canada, are listed). (AJ)

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Feminism and Literacy for Women: Politics and Resources

Mev Miller

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Feminism and Literacy for Women: Politics and Resources

by Mev Miller

In many ways, the contemporary women's movement (1960s to present) has been a movement that communicates through written word. Access to the words and ideas of women has been viewed as one of the ways women's lives could be enriched, changed, and improved. In the early years of this movement - when women's words were largely not accessible through mainstream sources - our desire for them resulted in the creation of feminist publishers of books, magazines, newspapers, and development of bookstores, libraries, and resource centers. In this way, the feminist movement has assumed the ability to read - made an assumption of literacy.

Though feminists claim a movement for all women, we have forgotten or failed to notice that in the United States, an estimated twenty-three percent of all adult females have severely limited literacy skills, compared to seventeen percent of males. For female heads of households, seventy-five percent of those with less than a high school diploma live in poverty, compared to thirty-four percent of men in the same situation. Nearly forty percent of female single parents and thirty-five percent of displaced home-makers have an eighth-grade education or less.1 Literacy brings with it both opportunity and personal enrichment - possibility and power. All women should be able to access the writings of women on the wide range of issues and topics concerning us - including women who struggle with reading. All women, regardless of reading skill, should be able to access the writings that bring to voice and visibility the life experiences of those who have traditionally been silenced and hidden.

It is my opinion that as feminist writings have moved from the places of activism to the places of academia, feminism in written format has become not only more prevalent but also more difficult to understand - even obtuse. This not only makes feminist theory inaccessible to those women with limited reading skills, but perhaps even irrelevant. As feminist perpetuators of emphasis on written materials - in our work as educators, librarians, activists, publishers, booksellers - we need to become more mindful of and active in addressing the issues of literacy for women.

When I first became active with Women Leading Through Reading (an initiative that sponsors book discussion groups for adult women working to improve their literacy skills), I began to notice how few women-centered or feminist resources are actually available for women with limited reading skills. As I have talked with learning center coordinators and adult educators, I've learned these materials are scarce but also desired. So, I've begun to research and compile a resource listing of such materials. I encourage readers to send me information about materials with which they are familiar (mev@ winternet.com). I'd be very interested in the viewpoints and experiences of the readers of this article - especially about what materials you may have found useful. The remainder of this article offers a brief survey of a few of the materials I have found to date.

Two feminist presses - Firebrand and Seal - have published a couple books each that are accessible to or specifically designed for women with limited reading skills. From Firebrand Books,2 *Movement in Black* by Pat Parker is now available in an expanded edition with an introduction by Cheryl Clarke. It offers straightforward poetry by a Black lesbian poet and activist. *Simple Songs*, stories by Vicki Sears, is a collection of short stories which reflect the Native American song traditions and "sings" the ordinary lives of Native children, women, and the Old Ones.

Seal Press3 offers two books of biography and history in the "Women Who Dared" Series about women who have affected political and social change in their countries and communities. *Getting the Real Story: Nellie Bly and Ida B. Wells* by Sue Davidson profiles two women who made their mark in the world of journalism at the turn of the century, while *A Heart in Politics: Jeannette Rankin and Patsy Mink* by Sue Davidson profiles two outstanding women politicians. Seal Press has also published several books on issues of domestic violence, including *You Can Be Free: An Easy to Read Handbook for Abused Women* by Ginny NiCarthy and Sue Davidson.

The University Press of Kentucky produces a series called New Books for New Readers. Though not specifically women-centered in focus, one of the titles is quite moving and fits well in this context. *Heartwood* by Nikkey Finney is a touching novel in which two young women, Trina Sims and Jenny Bryan, discover how much they are alike inside despite their different skin colors. *Women Who Made a Dif-ference* by Carol Crowe-Carraco includes short biographies of some of Kentucky's heroines - Jenny Wiley, Lucy Audubon, Mary Breckinridge, and Loretta Lynn among others.

The Writers' Voices Series from Signal Hill Publications - a division of New Readers Press4 and Laubach Literacy International - provides selec-tions from the work of well-known writers, compiled with a short biography of the author, an essay that places the work in historical context, and other supportive materials. Some of the writers are those recognized as

strong women - even feminist - writers. They include: *Selected from "I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings" and "The Heart of a Woman"* by Maya Angelou; *Selected from "The Joy Luck Club"* by Amy Tan; *Selected from "Love Medicine"* by Louise Erdrich; *Selected from "The Temple of My Familiar"* by Alice Walker; and *Selected from "The Women of Brewster Place"* by Gloria Naylor.

New Readers Press offers several other materials, including two health books in their series "A Quick and Easy Guide." *Women's Health* covers such issues as doctor visits, addiction issues, sexual health (including lesbian concerns), aging, violence, and other topics; *Having a Baby* includes not only the specific health concerns of childbirth but touches on the related issues of family changes, work and money concerns, and immediate concerns of the babies' health just after birth.

WomenVenture,5 a local organization here in St. Paul that helps women find jobs, plan careers, and start and grow businesses, has produced an easier-to-read book for women with little or no previous job experience. *Women Winning in the Workplace: How to Succeed in Your Job* includes practical information on the types of situations a woman would encounter in the workplace and provides an opportunity for the reader to explore alternative decision-making skills about these situations.

In addition to these easier-to-read materials, there exist a few important curriculum materials. *Making Connections: Literacy and EAL Curriculum from a Feminist Perspective*, produced by Cana-dian Congress for Learning Opportunities for Women (CCLOW),6 is a wonderful resource tool for educators looking for literacy materials from a feminist perspective. It includes suggestions for activities, writings by women learners, writing exercises, resource lists, sample stories, and more collected in a handsome spiral-bound format. Additionally, there are articles on how to use the materials as well as discussion on what constitutes a femi-nist curriculum. The chapters organize the materials by subject - gender roles, cultural awareness, role models, work, self-esteem, safer sex, and so on. *Doing the Gender Boogie: Power, Participation & Economic Justice - A Popular Education and Action Guide* by Debbie Culbertson offers strategies for understanding economic development for women. Though specific to a Canadian context, this work incorporates many international perspectives, including a discussion on trafficking in women (available from Ten Days for World Development7).

Several titles exist for those who would like to educate themselves or who want more in-depth understanding of women and literacy issues. *Something in My Mind Besides the Everyday: Women and Literacy* by Jennifer Horsman (from The Women's Press8) raises important issues for those of us concerned with how illiteracy affects women. It emphasizes the barriers to literacy for women, describes the ways in which women long for literacy, addresses some of the social perceptions of literacy, and outlines difficult philosophical questions. What is the definition of literacy? Is it enough to be functionally literate? How does literacy (or lack of it) reflect political and societal realities? Does literacy necessarily guarantee a higher quality of life for women? What motivates women? And what are the cold realities of the labor market and where does this intersect with levels of acquired literacy?

Two other important collections also come from Canada. *Canadian Women's Studies*' "Special Issue on Women and Literacy" includes some general articles on the politics of literacy as well as stories about the experiences of individual women. There are stories of several learning centers - both in Canada and overseas - how they are structured and what they hope to accomplish. There's also an article about a literacy program based in a library. Other articles address issues for special populations such as immigrant women, teen parents, and women with disabilities. The Canadian Congress for Learning Opportunities for Women has also published *Listen to Women in Literacy: The Power of Woman-Positive Literacy Work* by Tannis Atkinson with Frances Ennis and Betty-Ann Lloyd. It portrays the work of twelve adult literacy programs across Canada that initiated programs specifically for women. In accessible language, it describes the various strategies used by the programs and outlines what they learned about women's lives. It also directly talks about how programs can be women-positive and what role feminism plays in literacy work with women.

For more U.S.-based information on women and literacy deriving directly from women's experiences, there are two recommendations. *Until We Are Strong Together: Women Writers in the Tenderloin* by Caroline Heller witnesses the power of literacy in the lives of the members of the Tenderloin Women Writers Workshop, who gathered weekly in one of San Francisco's roughest neighborhoods, to share their writing and life experiences. *By Women /For Women: A Beginning Dialogue on Women and Literacy in the United States*, a booklet prepared by Laubach Literacy Action, reports information acquired by focus groups with adult women learners. The report outlines some of the critical barriers to women struggling to achieve literacy and provides important recommendations on how to address these issues.Finally, there are two recent novels that realistically fictionalize the problems faced by women with limited educational experience and literacy skills. *Push: A Novel* by Sapphire portrays Precious Jones, a sixteen-year-old woman passed through school until her suspension for being pregnant. The novel focuses on how Precious has been schooled without achieving literacy, and the changes that assist her in

becoming educated and self-sufficient. *Working Parts: A Novel* (Lambda Literary Award Finalist and ALA/GLBT Book Award) by Lucy Jane Bledsoe focuses on Lori Taylor, a les-bian bicycle mechanic who cannot read. Here, too, we come to understand how adults cope with and hide their inability to read while being witty and successful. In this novel, Lori faces her secret shame and, after several failed attempts, finally works to improve her reading skills. Both of these novels can be successfully used with adults with limited reading skills.

For additional suggestions in all of these areas, please visit the resource page on the Women Leading Through Reading website (www.litwomen.org/wltr.html).

NOTES

1. Statistics taken from the Laubach Literacy Action paper, "By Women/For Women: A Beginning Dialogue on Women and Literacy in the United States."

2. Firebrand Books, 141 The Commons, Ithaca, NY 14850; 607-272-0000; website: http://www. firebrandbooks.com.

3. Seal Press, 3131 Western Ave. Ste. 410, Seattle, WA 98121-1028; 206-283-7844

4. New Readers Press, P.O. Box 131, Syracuse, NY 13210-0131.

5. WomenVenture, 2324 University Ave., St. Paul, MN 55114; 651-646-3808; fax: 651-641-7223.

6. Canadian Congress for Learning Opportunities for Women, 47 Main St., Toronto, Ont., Canada M4E 2V6, 416-699-1909; fax: 416-699-2145; email: cclow@web.apc.org

7. Ten Days for World Development, 85 St. Clair Ave. E., Toronto, ONT. M4T 1M8 Canada; 416-922-0591; fax: 416-922-1419.

8. The Women's Press, 517 College St. Ste. 302, Toronto, Ont. M6G 4A2 Canada; 416-921-2425; fax: 416-921-4428; email: wompress@web.net.

[*Mev Miller has been active as a feminist in the book industry for more than fifteen years. She is a book buyer for Amazon Bookstore in Minneapolis, Project Coordinator for the Women's Presses Library Project, and co-founder of Women Leading Through Reading, a literacy initiative for women in the Twin Cities. Currently, Mev is also a candi-date for an Ed.D. in Critical Pedagogy, focusing on issues of women's literacy, at the University of St. Thomas in St. Paul, Min-nesota. For the academic year of 1999-2000, Mev has received a graduate student research grant to further study the availability of femi-nist and women-centered literacy materials. Please send your suggestions to mev@ winternet.com*]

Titles mentioned:

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Having a Baby. Syracuse, NY: New Readers Press, 1997. pap., $8.95, ISBN 1-56853-032-3.

A Heart in Politics: Jeannette Rankin and Patsy Mink by Sue Davidson. Seattle: Seal Press, 1994. pap., $9.95, ISBN 1-87806-753-2.

Heartwood by Nikkey Finney. Lexington, KY: University Press of Kentucky, 1998. pap., $4.95, ISBN 0-8131-0910-8.

Listen to Women in Literacy: The Power of Woman-Positive Literacy Work by Tannis Atkinson. Toronto, ONT: CCLOW, 1994. pap., Can.$5.00, ISBN 1-895686-38-5.

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Movement in Black by Pat Parker. Ithaca, NY: Firebrand, 1999. $26.95 cl, ISBN 1-56341-109-1; pap., $16.95, ISBN 1-56341-108-3.

Push: A Novel by Sapphire. New York: Random House, 1996. $20.00, ISBN 0-679-44626-5; pap., Knopf/Vintage, $11.00, ISBN 0-679-76675-8.

Selected from "I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings" and "The Heart of a Woman" by Maya Angelou. Syracuse, NY: New Readers Press, 1989. pap., $3.95, ISBN 0-929631-04-8.

Selected from "Love Medicine" by Louise Erdrich. Syracuse, NY: New Readers Press, 1996. pap., $3.95, ISBN 0-929631-02-1.

Selected from "The Joy Luck Club" by Amy Tan. Syracuse, NY: New Readers Press, 1992. pap., $3.95, ISBN 0-929631-51-X

Selected from "The Temple of My Familiar" by Alice Walker. Syracuse, NY: New Readers Press, 1996. pap., $3.95, ISBN 0-929631-59-5.

Selected from "The Women o f Brewster Place" by Gloria Naylor. Syracuse, NY: New Readers Press, 1991. pap., $3.95, ISBN 0-929631-33-1.

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